



An Exploration Group Report

THE UPPER WITELS

By KENWARD BENNINGTON,
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PETER ARDERNE

*Photographs by Kenward Bennington
and Walter Finlayson*

The Disa Waterfall and its terminal pool. Note the strength of the flow of the stream, bearing in mind that this photograph was taken at Christmas — midsummer! Comparable in beauty with the Krom Lake Falls, above Du Toit's Kloof.

INTRODUCTION

It is with very real and genuine pleasure that I have edited the report on the Upper Witels which follows this short introduction. Since publication of the earlier surveys of this magnificent kloof, it has been my privilege to give advice and supplementary information to numerous parties of enthusiasts essaying the final assault on the upper reaches. The report which follows has been compiled from the several accounts which have been furnished in consequence, and I congratulate all those whose determination has resulted in the completion of the piscatorial mapping of our greatest Western Province trout stream. I am sure that transit

of the Witels will be one of the major highlights in the angling lives of innumerable generations as yet unborn. It is a kloof that is, as yet, immune (by reason of steepness) from the sterilising hand of civic, provincial or national development—and it is relatively close at hand.

One more word! There is still a great deal of exploratory work to be done in the Witels. The 5th Gorge is still virtually unfinished; the tributaries (and notably that which enters the kloof just below the 4th Swim) are unmapped and also unfinished; the river above the now-recorded barrier is unstocked; the results of a sustained angling attack on the splendid pools and runs of Happy Valley still have to be known—let alone recorded! And so on!

—Alan Yates.

THE SLIT GORGES

THE first report received by the Cape Piscatorial Society concerning the Upper Witels came from Mr. Kenward Bennington, who did a quick traverse of the kloof, accompanied by Mr. Graeme Lingard, during the Christmas and New Year holidays of 1956.

Early in his report Mr. Bennington remarks that he had previously tried to bypass the tortuous curves and climb into Happy Valley by means of both the left and right hand buttresses, starting from Michell's Pass. The overland country was, however, very rough and nothing was gained over transit in the bed of the kloof. This, indeed, Mr. Bennington puts forward as one of the "golden rules" of the Witels.

"The other problem of this kloof," he continues, "is that of packs. Peter Clegg and party (granted as tough a bunch of sloggers as one could wish for) recently demonstrated this very clearly by rushing up the whole length of the kloof and climbing out at the top in one day—without any packs to speak of. A lot has been written about the 14 swims in the Witels and the difficulties in getting through them; but in actual fact very little of the whole time is spent in the swims. For the most part progress up the kloof consists of boulder hopping, which is a very quick and pleasant means of progress with light packs—but an exhausting and heartbreaking experience with heavy packs.

"After a good deal of planning we brought our packs down to 30 lb. each, but afterwards realised that we could have done better. Food was very basic and consisted mainly of rice, flour, dates, and the like. An allowance of 1 lb. weight per person per meal is adequate and even this allows for a few luxuries (like bread). Hot 'damper' made from flour is very tasty but requires a bit of practice even to be edible. Dried soups are invaluable.

"We negotiated the swims in a very simple fashion by means of one small rubber dinghy just large enough to take our two packs. Graeme Lingard, being by far the stronger swimmer, went ahead towing 50 feet of light rope with myself pushing—and often hanging on to!—the dinghy. For the last 50 feet of the swims I just relaxed while boat and 'crew' were pulled in. Ferrying kit backwards and forwards across swims was definitely 'out' on account of waste of time."

Mr. Bennington and his partner started off at first light (4.30 a.m.) on December 23, 1956, and, with a good rest in the heat of the day, pushed up the kloof for twelve hours. They stopped for the night "well past Oorvergenoeg Camp".

"An hour's walk the next day," he continues, "took us to the mouth of the 11th Swim and from here on the trip was exciting in every sense of the word. Traversing the 11th Swim itself is a very eerie experience and the water was ice-cold! Halfway along there is a domed recess in the right-hand wall which provides a very welcome resting place. Once through the swim one has a feeling of being in a world apart. The cliffs rise sheer for about 200 feet on either side.

The 11th Swim, looking downstream from the top. Approximately 150 yards in length, this is the second longest "swim" in the kloof.



"After some 200 yards of boulder hopping we came to the climax of our trip: The Tunnel—in which is situated the 12th, 13th and 14th Swims. The cliffs here are over 100 feet high, overhanging, and, in many places, even overlapping each other. In two places the gap between the cliffs is bridged by enormous chockstones; in others daylight is cut off by vegetation. Certainly one has the impression of going up a tunnel through the mountains, and it was now that I realised why Alan Yates could not pick out these swims from aerial photographs.

"Another 300 yards of boulder hopping passed and we suddenly came across a deep cleft in the left hand cliff containing what was obviously the big sister of the Goddess Pool at the head of the 7th Swim. Here we stopped and admired the breathtaking beauty of the cascade and the perfectly round pool at its base. We were through the Slit Gorges and before us lay the Upper Witels valley.

"Here we saw brown trout and many wild duck. The waterfalls harboured red disas and another very similar flower.

"Proceeding up this valley we encountered two deep wades, and then suddenly we saw a waterfall 120 feet high falling sheer over the left hand cliff, surpassing anything we had previously encountered. Surely the queen of all Witels waterfalls—and complete with a large, crystal-clear, circular pool at the base.

"After another half hour of boulder hopping we reached a fork in the kloof. Taking the left hand stream as obviously carrying the most water, we carried on for another half hour before we reached a series of two pools, each with its waterfall. This was obviously the Barrier that Yates had warned us to expect. It was possible to climb round on the left bank but we only did so to the extent needful to take photographs of the upper waterfall.

"We retraced our steps and descended the Witels in easy stages, camping at Oorvergenoeg and Camp Site 4 on the two following nights. The whole trip had taken us three and a half days but to be really enjoyable two full days should be allowed for both the journey up and the journey down."

Mr. Bennington's account certainly captures the mystery and might of the Upper Witels. In evaluating his time schedule, and his remarks on food stores required, anglers should remember that he and Graeme Lingard were purely concerned with covering distance and that their trip was not concerned at all with fishing.

The lower entrance to the 12th Swim, and to the continuation of the Slit Gorges.



THE second report on the Upper Witels which has been presented to the Society has been compiled jointly by Mr. Walter Finlayson and Mr. Peter Arderne, who made the trip to the Barrier Falls in company with Anthony Townsend and Brian Ratcliffe.

This party took the Adderley Street route over the Schurfteberg Saddle and found that the fire which had swept over the mountains earlier in the 1958-59 season had made the going far easier by reason of clearing out the bush. They did, however, have to watch carefully for loose boulders and stones on the steeper slopes.

One feature of interest which we discovered," reports Mr. Finlayson, "was a beautifully sheltered cave at the top of the Valsrivier Valley which we named Mooi Uitsig. This cave would provide a very useful shelter in the event of mist or storm as it has a fair-sized pool in one corner."

The Valsrivier is the tributary stream which drains into the Titusrivier and lies close at hand on the left as one climbs up the Schurfteberg from Vergenoeg Farm. I was extremely interested to hear of the discovery—and there are doubtless numerous other shelters of a like nature to be discovered in and around the Witels Valley.

I was also interested to read Finlayson's account of another discovery. Before he set out I asked him—if he had time—to have a look at the lower portion of the Rooiwaterstroom tributary. As has already been described in earlier reports, this stream descends into the Witels via a high waterfall system just to the north of Oorvergenoeg Krantz.

Mr. Finlayson reports that there is a nice pool before "one reaches a number of small waterfalls which are definitely barriers to fish. Above these, however, are a number

The 14th Swim—the uppermost in the trout-stocked main kloof of the Witels River. This photograph is taken from the top, looking downstream.



of beautiful swims, each with a waterfall at the head, until one finally comes to the main waterfalls. There are two of these, each several hundred feet high, dropping into a large, very deep pool about 40 yards long and 15 yards wide—a most beautiful sight!"

This report confirms my conviction that there are rewarding experiences to be gained from the Witels tributaries, and, bearing in mind the very close proximity of the Rooiwaterstroom entry to Oorvergenoeg Camp, I sincerely hope that some future expedition will take a day "off" and endeavour to establish trout in this section by catching a few dozen in the main river and transporting them up the tributary.

Mr. Peter Arderne takes up the report at this juncture and describes the party's movement through the 11th Swim and into the Slit Gorges. He usefully records the 11th as being 150 yards in length, and the 12th, 13th and 14th as being respectively 60, 40 and 40 yards in length. This leaves the 7th as the longest swim in the kloof, with the 11th claiming second place.

It is interesting to note that the sight which greeted Arderne in this section of the kloof evoked the same description as that previously suggested by Bennington: that of Tunnel. "Only a thin shaft of light penetrates through the narrow opening in the roof of this cavern," reports Arderne, "and when we returned in the late afternoon the place was only very dimly lit. The whole stretch had a distinctly eerie atmosphere.

"With the Tunnel behind us as we travelled upstream we were greeted with the familiar sound of a waterfall and soon came to a left bank tributary which dropped into a large, basin-shaped pool. These lovely pools are very characteristic of the Upper Witels and are all very likely-looking fishing spots.

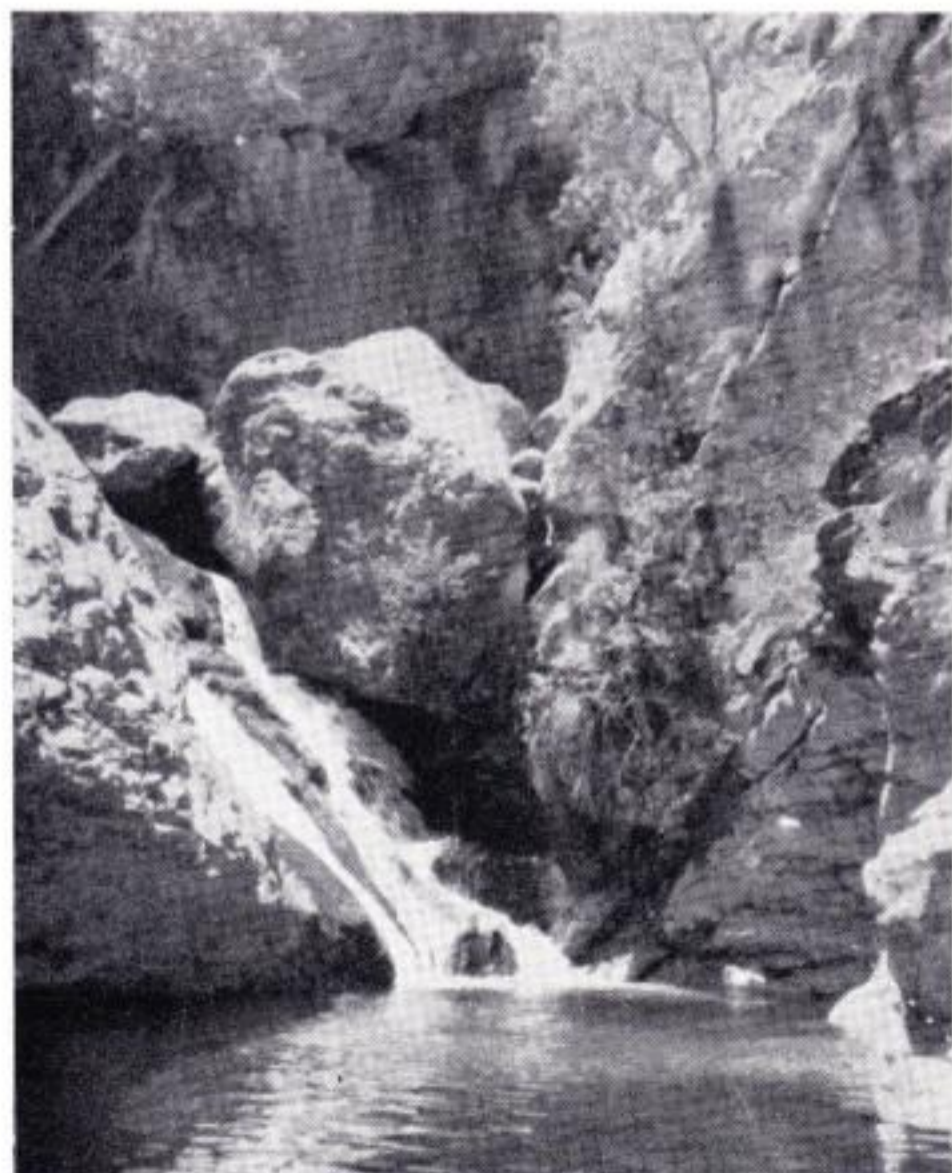
"Up to this point there had been no sign of trout, but on the next bend Brian Ratcliffe landed a nice 12-inch brown which dispelled any doubt about there being trout in this part of the kloof. In general, however, the fishing in this narrow gorge is not as good as in the Middle Valley—primarily because the geography diminishes the number of holding places, apart from the waterfall pools and wades.

"None the less, this section of the river has a particular charm, which is to be found in its magnificent scenery. On this count alone, any party spending a few days in the Middle Valley should certainly pay at least one visit to the Upper Witels."

Mr. Arderne describes the party's trip through the wades, of which three were noted, the first being relatively shallow. The fact that Bennington and Lingard only



Greenwater Pool, at the base of one of the major tributaries entering the Witels from the south-east, in the section of river that lies between the 14th Swim and the Barrier Falls.



The base of the final Barrier Falls in the Witels River Kloof.

The upper section of the Barrier Falls in the great Witels Kloof.



reported two wades probably derives from the fact that their trip was undertaken several weeks later in the season.

The second left bank tributary waterfall was also reported by Mr. Arderne, and obviously aroused as much enthusiasm as it had aroused in the earlier expedition. "The loveliest scene in the whole of the Witels kloof," he writes. "A good volume of water spills down the cliff face into a large pool paved with colourful stones. On each side of the falls the krantz is lined with masses of disas—and what a glorious sight it is!"

Passing through the Corkscrew, the party (as in the case of Bennington and Lingard) had no hesitation in choosing the left hand route when they came to the fork. And so they, in turn, reached the Barrier.

Walter Finlayson takes up the tale again to describe the return down to Oorvergenoeg Camp and the climb out. Notwithstanding a night at Sandy Camp, during which their sleeping-bags were damped by an early morning drizzle and the first part of their journey being made in misty weather, this party essayed another tributary exploration and found a terminal pool and waterfall some forty yards up a heavily bushed stream coming in from the east about half-way down the Middle Valley. I really do applaud exploratory perseverance such as this—and I have no doubt but that we shall all enjoy reading further reports of this particular group of stout-hearted fellows.

It only remains for me to add one further word of explanation. Both the 1956 and the 1958 expeditions to the Upper Witels have provided me with suggested names for sundry features and pools. It is, I feel, essential for the avoidance of future confusion to postulate one name for each—and stick to it. Up to the 11th Swim I had what might be described as a free hand in this regard; so far as the Upper Witels is

concerned I have had to select from the various excellent suggestions that have been made. I have done this in editing these reports and in the construction of the accompanying map. Some of the names have been taken from one party's work; some from the other. Two have been adopted from the pre-planning, theoretical survey work. I can only express a hope that I have made the best choice and that future generations of anglers will endorse them.

And finally! This Exploration Group Report brings to an end the researches of the Cape Piscatorial Society into the main, trout-established section of the Witels Kloof. The fish-barrier waterfall has been reached—but above this lies some not uninteresting water. As the stream bends round to the north-west towards its source on Waaihoek Peak there are some deep pools against a steep-to southern krantz; in the more freely watered western drainage system there are several further waterfalls and, inevitably, major terminal pools. All this is deduced from air survey work, but the substantial assistance which study of stereoscopic aerial photographs has rendered to date indicates that this type of preliminary examination is reliable. The polythene-bag-and-oxygen method of trout fingerling transportation has opened up new vistas of trout stocking. Is it possible that the piscatorial length of the Witels may, at some future date, be still further extended?